

Women living in lawless society, says Boyle

By ERIN STEUTER

A battered woman strikes back. Repeatedly assaulted and abused by her husband, her cries for help to both the police and the state have fallen upon deaf ears. Taking the law into her own hands she burns her husband in his bed.

This is the story of Francine Hughs as told in the NBC drama *The Burning Bed*. Aired on Oct. 8, the fact-based account focused media attention on what appears to be an increasing unwillingness of law enforcement officers to prosecute abusive husbands.

"There is quite a lot of evidence to show that police are reluctant to respond to complaints by a woman that she is being beaten. And even when they do they often don't press charges," says Dalhousie law professor Christine Boyle. "In Halifax, the police tolerate a fairly high level of abusive activity."

Author of a newly-published book, *Sexual Assault*, Boyle says that although there is plenty of law in theory to protect women from being assaulted, the problem lies in the enforcement of the law.

"If the police won't press charges against abusive husbands the crim-

inal law really doesn't make much difference," she says.

"There can't be a great deal of understanding or concern about the position of battered women in any kind of legal system that is essentially designed, performed and operated by men," says Dalhousie education professor Toni Laidlaw.

"We live in a society where women are victims, and women are property, and where women are seen as something to be abused," she says.

Ann Derrick points out that battered women have very few options. A lawyer with the all-female law firm of Buchan, Derrick and Ring, she says that if an abused woman runs away, her husband usually finds her. If she gets a peace order, he may well ignore it, and often if she presses charges and he spends some time in jail he is twice as violent when he is released. Says Derrick, "It is then that women retaliate violently."

While the power of the criminal law is notably absent when a woman is being abused, Boyle says that a woman who retaliates is often given the full force of it.

Boyle says she believes that this is because the courts are not interpreting the law in such a way as to

respond to the reality of the situation that women are in. She says in the situation of a battered woman one should think of her as "living in a jungle" and think about what's justifiable in that context.

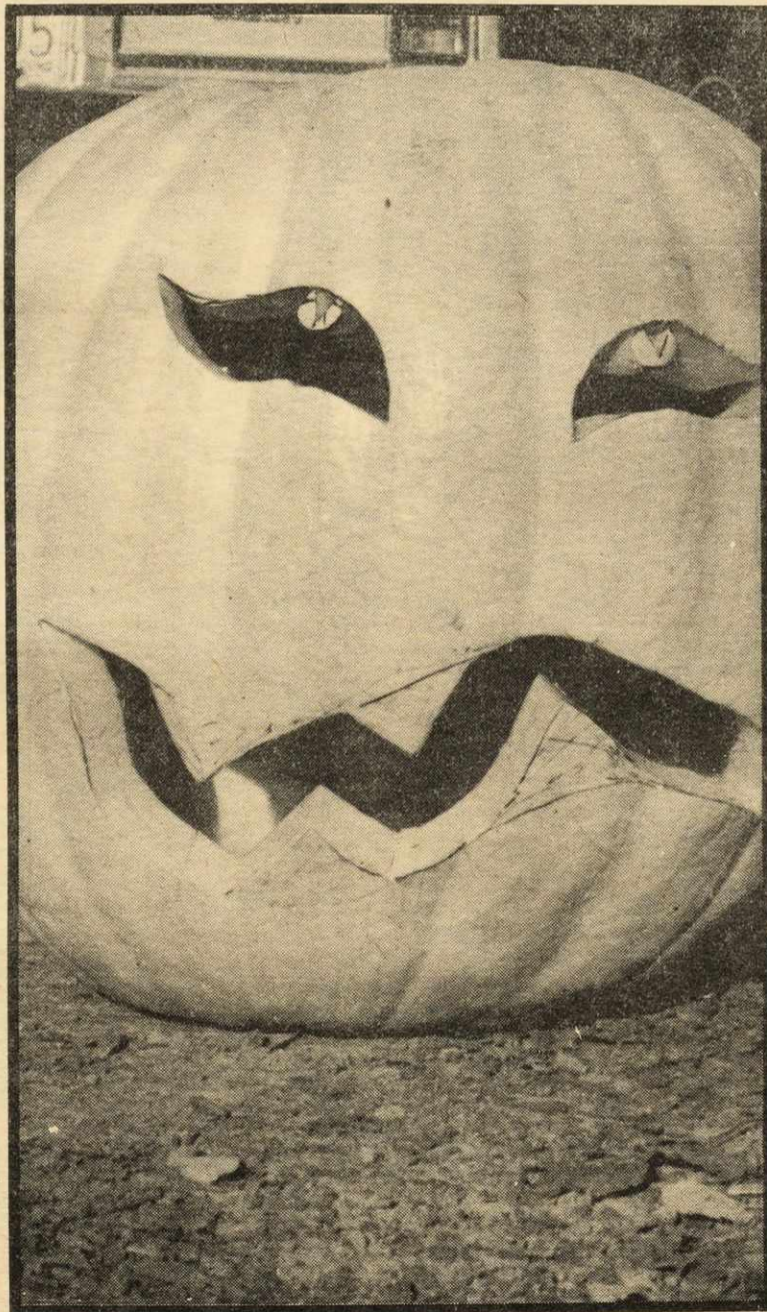
"Say you were living in the jungle, and someone kept jumping out at you and beating you up, and say you had real cause to believe that they were going to kill you or somebody close to you; if you found them asleep sometime, you might well kill them," she says.

"Women are living in a lawless world," says Boyle. "We pretend they are living in a world surrounded by police officers and assistance from the law when that might not be the case."

"In a practical sense some women live in a world without law and we shouldn't judge them according to the standards of a lawful world."

Boyle says that the answer to domestic violence lies in an examination of men's attitudes towards women.

"It is hardly surprising," she says, "that when the subject of battered women is brought up in parliament that the MPs just laughed. If police took domestic assault more seriously it might make people realize that this is a serious matter that we have to do something about." □



"Ugh," says unidentified pumpkin following Tuesday's Republican landslide. "Ronald Reagan's economic policies make me feel really icky."

Photo: Darryl C. Macdonald, Dal Photo



Rum flavoured.
Wine dipped.

Crack a pack of Colts along with the cards.